



Ancient classroom at [Sumer](#)

History, Culture and Schooling

Professor Michael Cole's long essay "Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on the Developmental Consequences of Education" has been divided for the CU's purposes into three parts.

It begins by asking fundamental questions about the place of schooling in society, the nature of education, and whether schooling and education are ever, or could ever be, the same thing.

Mike Cole undertakes to *"venture into a brief synopsis of historical variations in the ways that adults organize the lives of the young so that they acquire knowledge and skills deemed essential to communal life."*

Early in the essay, Cole writes: *“It was widely assumed [‘in the 19th century’] that cross-cultural comparisons were simultaneously cross-historical. So-called primitive societies were taken as evidence about early stages of history for all human groups.”*

This is a reference to the views, not so much of anthropologists (who were always divided), as of Hegel, Marx and Engels and their successors, the communists of today, who have an explicit, scientific, philosophical and historical theory of development, which is always human development.

Note that the first line of the Communist Manifesto, after the preamble, is: *“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,”* to which Frederick Engels, in the 1888 edition, added: *“That is, all written history.”* Engels proceeds to refer to his work *“The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.”*

This view of development is not actually “19th century” but is at base simply humanist, and as such, it is as old as recorded history, as much as reactionary, anti-humanist ideas have always and up to the present time, been part of the same history.

Cole mentions some of the more recent anti-humanist ideologies such as the “post-modernism” that attacks all (what they call) “master narratives” or “grand narratives”. Cole claims to be prepared to be inconclusive about this, but

we in our course will not be content to leave the matter like that.

For one reason, theories of “diversity” are not easily distinguished from theories of racialism. For that reason alone, in South Africa, the option for humanism is not in doubt from the point of view of the liberation movement.

This brings us close to the heart of the question of education: Whether it has a moral content or not? And whether it can be revolutionary, or not?

We will proceed, during this part 3 of our course, after reading Cole, to touch on Hegel, and on the way in which a conscious morality can be conceived of as integral to the theory of human development, and consequently, of education, and therefore, of schooling.

Cole’s reservations do not prevent him from making a firm distinction between the pre-historic societies wherein education is indistinguishable from life in general, and what he refers to as the “sea change” of civilisation, starting in the Middle East, when schooling becomes a separate institution, and very clearly an instrument of class-division that elevates the ruling class, while subordinating the exploited classes.

From this base Cole proceeds, in our second division of his essay, to *“Consequences of Schooling in Post-Colonial Societies”*. We will take this as the next item of this week’s part of the course. Suffice it to note at this point that

Professor Cole, based at the University of California in San Diego, appears compelled to discuss education as a whole in terms of the problems of Imperialism, in what he refers to as “Post-Colonial Societies”.

And indeed the problems of Imperialism and of education cannot be separated from the general human struggle for freedom.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Cole, Perspectives, Part 1, The Advent of Schooling, 2005.](#)
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